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ABSTRACT

A psychology for responding to student writing that follows Adlerian principles can provide teachers with a basis for reacting to student papers. The teacher commentary derived from individual psychology should be supplemented by editorial comments directed to individual problems, and it works best with freshman composition courses full of novice writers. Adlerian principles of encouragement, natural consequences such as praise or withdrawal, and minimal criticism contribute to teacher/student relationships based on cooperation and lessen the potential for conflict. Encouragement should be balanced with constructive criticism, with students having the option of rewriting until they succeed. Another technique based on Adlerian psychology is holding class councils or meetings during which class members can discuss specific writing assignments or probe evaluation criteria. Encouragement is the most important concept and must be high in the teacher's priorities, because without it and the students' perceptions of genuine concern and interest by the teacher, this system of responding to composition has little chance of success. (AEA)

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Responding to Composition: An Adlerian Approach

Richard H. Dillman

E. D. Hirsch, in The Philosophy of Composition, cites the need for maxims that may be useful in annotating student composition, and he calls explicitly for research on effective methods of marking papers. He explains that paper marking "may turn out to be the most effective teaching device of all" and that "well-conceived comments on papers are probably more effective than formal lectures on composition" because such commentary is relatively permanent and can be individualized.[1] In response to his call for further research, I wish to offer some principles derived from Adlerian psychology that provide teachers with a psychological basis for writing comments on student papers.

In late nineteenth-century Austria, Alfred Adler developed a theory of psychology, tested in guidance clinics, that was based on the concept of social interest, which he defined loosely as "striving for community or fellowship." He argued that language use, as part of human behavior, is designed to "connect the individual with the community."[2] Another Austrian psychologist, Rudolf Driekurs, a student of Adler's, immigrated in the early 1930's to the United States where he adapted Adlerian theory to the conditions of American social democracy. He expanded the concept of social interest to include the need to belong to a group, the need to

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cooperate with others, the need to participate, contribute and to recognize the fundamental equality of all human beings, as well as the need to solve personal problems in accordance with the common welfare.[3] Unlike Freudian theory and behaviorism, Adlerian psychology, also known as individual psychology, clearly stresses that man is a social creature who becomes fully human and well-adjusted in a group context.

Social interest, not surprisingly, has important implications for rhetoric. To function effectively in a social matrix, we must communicate effectively, acting as rhetoricians who can use language to induce cooperation, a major goal of individual psychology and an effective way to win acceptance within a group. This concept of social interest, significantly, resembles Kenneth Burke's idea that rhetoric is "rooted in the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols."[4]

Rudolf Dreikurs developed several principles for inducing cooperation in children, adolescents, and adults as he adapted Adlerian ideas to America's changing, democratic culture. Several of these concepts, which were validated in an extensive network of guidance clinics throughout the United States, are pertinent to problems of responding effectively to student writing. They may be used flexibly, with teachers adapting them to specific teaching problems, but we must still provide inexperienced writers with the knowledge and tools to improve their writing. Moreover, they will work best, I think, with freshman level composition courses, especially required courses full of novice writers without ESL or social dialect problems. Basic writing students, to be sure, can benefit from commentary based on Adlerian notions, but teacher expectations must be

realistic and in tune with student ability. I am not arguing for a panacea, however; commentary derived from individual psychology should, of course, be supplemented by editorial comments directed to individual problems. What's more these principles can be used both to help structure oral commentary in the writing conference and as a basis for written commentary, the emphasis in this essay.

The first two principles--the fallacy of punishment and reward and the necessity for encouragement--and their corollary, minimizing criticism, are important for setting a climate in which writing skills may grow. Their application can help establish a cooperative atmosphere--one based on mutual respect--in the composition class.

The fallacy of punishment and reward relates directly to assigning grades. Dreikurs explains that punishment and reward belong properly in an autocratic social system in which the dominant authority has the privilege of distributing rewards or punishments by merit.[5] In such a system, autocratic judgements are part of the code of life, but in a democratic culture they are outdated and ineffective because they promote resistance. Even small children recognize their essential equality to teachers and other adults, and attempts to govern classes autocratically are often resented. Our students, who tend to see us as social equals, generalize the equality they see between teachers and between students and teachers outside class to the classroom and view low grades as discouraging. Such grades tell students they are inferior writers, thus contributing to a larger pattern of discouragement for students with a history of academic difficulty. Seen as "punishment for writing performance," low grades may convince students they will remain poor writers.

When evaluating compositions, many of us tend to emphasize errors, often suggesting to students that they are our only concern. Dreikur's

tells us we are culturally induced to overestimate the significance of mistakes, thus spending an inordinate amount of time trying to correct or prevent them. The concept of English teacher as error corrector--as eliminator of defects--lies firmly in our cultural myths. Too often, people outside the English profession become self-conscious about their language in our presence, expecting us "to correct their grammar." Emphasizing mistakes while responding to writing is discouraging, effective in retarding rather than enhancing writing growth. Teachers can build only on strength, not weakness," Dreikurs explains,[6] but to do so we must encourage our students by accenting the positive in our commentary. In practice, minimizing mistakes means reducing criticism. In short, we must, as Adlerians recommend, curb some of our first critical impulses when confronted with writing we feel is ungrammatical, illogical or somehow below our expectations. We must avoid calling too much attention to errors and avoid being overly judgemental about deficiencies. By decreasing our attention to error, moreover, we can help set an open and trusting atmosphere for the writing class.

How, the skeptic may ask, are we to teach composition if we do not show students their weaknesses? We can, but we must realize that many poor writers have been over-corrected and thus tend to ignore negative commentary. They have become, in effect, teacher deaf. On this point, Dreikurs explains that one reason for the utter ineffectiveness of most verbal correction lies in the communicative function of words; verbal commentary "can only be effective if the addressed is willing to listen."[7] Excess criticism blocks communication, while encouragement may enhance it. In fact, Dreikurs says that teachers all know how to discourage, finding

it easy to criticize and look down on others, but they don't know how to encourage, frequently rationalizing "that they are correcting for the student's benefit, but unaware that far less benefit accrues to the student than to [the teacher's] own ego.[8] In following individual psychology, the teacher should express faith in the student "as he is" (or "she is"), not as the teacher would like him or her to be. Since we seldom, unless conducting conferences, have much personal contact with our students, we can use commentary to encourage, also helping to set a positive tone to the class.

And there are several ways to do this.[9] We can react to student ideas as an audience interested in their thoughts. We can ask to hear more about their ideas, or we can express sympathy with their viewpoint, perhaps revealing that we had similar views or experiences. Significantly, we can encourage them with our comments before explaining what should be improved and how to go about it. Above all, we can carefully identify our student's successes, however small, so they can build on them. If a student writes effective description but has other writing problems, then perhaps he or she should continue writing in this mode. Or if a student writes better about personal experience than on, say literary topics, he or she should continue writing on such topics to gain confidence. Some composition teachers may claim that their students don't do anything right, but such judgements may derive from unrealistic expectations. Certainly if we lower our demands to realistically consider their level of achievement, we can find something positive on which to build. At times, this may only be one or two effective sentences in an essay, and at other times, if we are truely committed to helping most basic writers, we may have to

individualize our expectations, returning to a ninth or tenth grade standard (or below) for some writers.

For changing attitudes and motivating students in any subject, Adlerians recommend using natural and logical consequences. By natural consequences, they mean allowing the consequences of behavior to determine whether the behavior is desirable, and by logical consequences they mean a teacher initiated consequence that fits the requirements of the situation.[10] We can, for example, allow the pressure of reality to stimulate writing improvement, and natural consequences can easily be applied as we respond to themes. Well-written, interesting papers will naturally elicit positive, encouraging commentary, while poorly written papers will not. Withholding encouragement violates Adlerian thinking and is damaging in the long run, but we can still provide natural consequences for incoherent writing by asking students to clarify or explain themselves. Assuming that composition instructors are governed to some extent by Zipf's law--the principle of least effort[11]--we have, considering our heavy teaching loads, little intellectual energy to spare deciphering cryptic writing. It is both natural and logical to refuse to read confusing papers beyond a reasonable point. Two pages or so of incoherent prose may be annotated, then we may legitimately ask for a revision. Such a policy, since it allows a second chance, does not excessively penalize for errors, and it emphasizes the social fact that the prose is unclear. By refusing to read on, we allow a reality of human relationships to enter the class, and we appeal to the students' social interest. If the same student wrote an incoherent letter to a prospective employer as part of a job application, it may likely be

ignored. Moreover, if he or she spoke unclearly to peers, responses like "I don't understand" could be expected.

Asking for the revision also acknowledges the reality of the composing process: that writing is a difficult craft in which revision is crucial. Moreover, it recognizes the importance of experimentation in learning to write, the basic trial and error process familiar to more experienced writers. As Mina Shaughnessy observes, poor writers "write the way they do, not because they are slow or non-verbal, indifferent to or incapable of academic excellence, but because they are beginners and must, like all beginners, learn by making mistakes."[12] We must, to be sure, offer all the assistance our students need to successfully revise their papers.

Perhaps an explanation of the Adlerian concept of withdrawal will help clarify this revision policy. Adlerians recommend withdrawal from difficult situations as an effective method of changing behavior.[13] If consequences like asking for clarification, are ineffective, the teacher may then withdraw from the evaluation situation with the next paper, if it is seriously deficient, and request a revision. In my own teaching, I often withdraw from situations where following the old procedure of punishment for error by assigning a discouraging grade would be discouraging. I routinely assign a "grade" of "Rewrite" for papers that fall below my minimum course standards, thus removing the stigma of failure. By withdrawing from a potential conflict situation, I allow the students to reformulate their ideas, and I try to approximate the conditions of serious conversation in which a speaker may reform his ideas as part of, say, a loose dialectic. I do not withdraw from the student, only from the paper, offering the writer encouragement and enough guidance to im-

prove. And both in conference and in their revisions, these students often respond with renewed energy to the challenge of expressing their ideas to me, a concerned audience.

Adlerians also recommend that teachers concentrate on one problem at a time. They reason that if students improve in one area, improvement in others may shortly follow; success in one area may lead to success in others. The student, for instance, who improves his or her syntax may go on soon to improve in organization or logic, and he or she may find it much easier to amplify ideas once they have mastered basic sentence structure.[14] Even small successes can be encouraging.

Additionally, class councils or meetings, another Adlerian idea, can be effectively used to apply natural consequences to writing efforts and to supplement written commentary. This method involves the class in democratic goal setting, and it helps to enhance motivation, while it offers a useful format for discussion, planning, and problem solving. For example, the class may agree to work on a specific type of writing, or they may discuss methods of developing their essays, or they may probe evaluation criteria. Technically, the chair rotates for each meeting, and each participant is allowed one vote on questions of mutual concern. To work well, the council must be democratic, and the instructor must not use the opportunity to preach or otherwise impose his or her views, and all questions of policy must be reached by consensus, not majority vote.[15] As a flexible tool, the class council can be used with the entire class or with small groups within the class. Its democratic format may even prove useful in one-to-one conferences. By allowing everyone to speak on whatever area of writing most concerns them, students may express complaints and relieve frustrations that might hinder

their writing. The meeting most logically can be used for reading and discussing student writing, with students allowed to comment on their peer's work. Thus we can establish a forum for offering feedback and encouragement in a group context. Peer reaction, moreover, may provide students with a more immediate sense of the effectiveness of their writing than teacher commentary, and they may work harder to improve their compositions if doing so may enhance their social positions--that is, we may appeal to their social interest. Students, Dreikurs reminds us, are often more willing to take directions from peers that they would not readily accept from teachers.[16] In short, improving their writing may help students find their places within the class.

A psychology for responding to student writing that follows Adlerian principles, like encouragement, natural consequences, and minimizing criticism, will, I think, be relatively humane. The teacher-student relationship would be based on cooperation and the potential for conflict would be minimized. Encouragement would be balanced with constructive criticism, with students having the option of rewriting until they succeeded. Moreover, the pressure of reality would be applied through natural reactions to poor writing, and the social value of language would be emphasized.

Encouragement, the most important precept, must be high in the instructor's priorities. Without it and the student's perception of genuine concern and interest by the teacher, this system may have little chance of success. Finally, its most important function may be to change attitudes toward writing, which in itself is a major accomplishment.

Footnotes

[1]E. D. Hirsch, Jr., The Philosophy of Composition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), pp. 160-61.

[2]Alfred Adler, Superiority and Social Interest: A Collection of Later Writings, ed. Heinz L. Ansbacher and Rowena R. Ansbacher (Chicago: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1964), pp. 36-38.

[3]Ray Lowe, Dreikursian Principles of Child Guidance (Eugene, Oregon: Univ. of Oregon College of Education, 1974), pp. 18-19.

[4]Kenneth Burke, A Rhetoric of Motives (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 43.

[5]Rudolf Dreikurs, M.D., Children: the Challenge (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1964), p. 69.

[6]Raymond Corsini, Rudolf Dreikurs, Raymond Lowe, and Manford Sonstegard, Adlerian Family Counseling: A Manual for Counseling Centers (Eugene, Oregon: University of Oregon Press, 1959), pp. 46, 107.

[7]Corsini, Dreikurs, Lowe, Sontegard, p. 24.

[8]Rudolf Dreikurs, Psychology in the Classroom: A Manual for Teachers (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 65.

[9]Hirsch also stresses encouragement as a maxim of commentary, advising teachers to "State the comments in an encouraging manner." Hirsch, p. 160. Adlerians are careful to point out the difference between encouragement and praise, claiming that praise is ultimately discouraging. A statement of praise would resemble "You are certainly a superior writer," while encouraging statements separate the product from the producer. For example, "Your essay is interesting, enjoyable, and clearly written. Your treatment of opposing arguments is complex, yet balanced and fair." See Dreikurs, Children: the Challenge, pp. 46, 55.

[10]Corsini, Dreikurs, Lowe, Sontegard, p. 23. Logical consequences differ from natural consequences in that they require more teacher intervention. A natural consequence of plainly incoherent writing is lack of communication, while the logical consequence of understandable but ungrammatical writing may be a teacher's decision to ask for revision.

[11]G. K. Zipf, Human Behavior and the Principle of Least Effort (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1949), pp. 19-22.

[12]Mina P. Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), p. 5.

[13]See Corsini, Dreikurs, Lowe, Sonstegard, p. 25; Dreikurs, Children: the Challenge, pp. 155-161.

[14]Dreikurs, Children: the Challenge, pp. 122-127. Hirsch, similarly, also recommends concentrating on only a few points in any paper and only on those matters "which are most important for an individual at a particular time." Hirsch, p. 160.

[15]Corsini, Dreikurs, Lowe, Sonstegard, pp. 28-30. Note the similarities between the use of the class meeting and the peer group reading advocated by Ken MacRorie, for example, in Uptaught (New York: Hayden Book Co., 1970).

[16]Donald Dinkmeyer and Rudolf Dreikurs, Encouraging Children to Learn: The Encouragement Process (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1963).